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**SUMMARY**

1. PURPOSE. To provide security and policy review on document at tab 1 prior to release to the public.
2. BACKGROUND. The attached essay is intended for publication in the Encyclopedia of Political Thought.

Presenter / Author: Dr. Rouven J. Steeves, Lt Col, USAF

Title: "Commonwealth"

Circle one: Abstract      Tech Report      Journal Article      Speech      Paper      Presentation      Poster  
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Description: The essay is a historical overview of the term "commonwealth."

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3. DISCUSSION. N/A

4. VIEWS OF OTHERS. N/A

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1 tab  
 paper

Commonwealth  
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1,999 Words

### Definition

The word commonwealth is a compound of the Old English words “common” and “weal,” which entails a more classic understanding of “wealth” as “well-being.” A commonwealth in its most general sense therefore involves a conception of common and public well-being—as opposed to the *res privata*, or private affairs—with respect to various forms of human association, without being tied to any particular form of government. The term itself finds its origins in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a translation of the Latin *res republika* meaning “things public” (alternately, “public matter” or “public affair”). In turn, the roots of *res republika* reside in the writings of Roman moralists and statesmen. They in turn were working with conceptions of the common good first formulated by Plato and Aristotle, for whom all human associations must be concerned with the well-being of the community arising out of the right ordering of the souls of individuals in terms of the cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice, the latter binding the community together. In the city just as in the soul of the individual, “It’s injustice that produces factions, hatreds, and quarrels among themselves, and justice that produces unanimity and friendship” (Plato, *Republic*: 351d). This conception of commonwealth undergirds Cicero’s foundational synthesis (106-43 BCE) in *On the Commonwealth* (54-51 BCE), where he has Scipio state, “The commonwealth is the concern of a people” assembled and “associated with one another through agreement on law and community of interest” (Cicero 2008: 34). Beyond these thematic touchstones there exists no comprehensive and systemic definition, though in both classic and early modern formulations the term never fails to evoke a sense of social, political, or socio-political community concerned with public well-being—

the common-wealth. Only with the political turmoil plaguing 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, especially in England, does the term begin to become a point of controversy with respect to its meaning and implications for socio-political order.

### The History of a Concept

The concept of commonwealth conceived primarily in political terms as a republic, itself a broad category covering various forms of government whereby rule is adjudicated by the people or the law, or both—in contrast to heredity or arbitrary rule, or both—has a global history.

Governments with at least some republican sensibilities informed by a concern with the common good can be traced to ancient India (c. 700 BCE) and Iceland (c. CE 900), not to mention the republican institutions of certain city-states in ancient Mesopotamia (3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE), the Israelite confederation during the time of the judges (12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century, BCE), and possibly the Axum empire (1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE) and Igbo nation (late 1<sup>st</sup>, early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium CE) of Africa.

Nevertheless, it is via Western civilization that the most robust line of theoretical reflection and practical implementation transpires. It begins with Italian city-states in the fifteenth century Renaissance recovering and manipulating Greco-Roman rooted conceptions of commonwealth. This in turn feeds into the variegated debates regarding republicanism and the commonwealth arising in sixteenth century England, which culminate in the thought of the eighteenth century “common-wealthman” and the transatlantic migration of republican principles to the American colonies and eventually their embodiment in the American founding. Though this history is by no means a straight-forward chronological and progressive unfolding, the concept of common-wealth never loses its foundational civic and political vision of promoting the common good—a vision captured in Abraham Lincoln’s words in the “Gettysburg Address”: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

### The Greco Roman Foundations

It is with the birth of philosophy in fifth century Greece that the first coherent socio-political theories of community and the common good arise in the works of Plato (429-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). The impetus for these reflections, as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) understood in light of his translation of Thucydides, is the moral and socio-political crisis unleashed by the Peloponnesian War. The corrective to the decay of order is the right ordering of the city-soul articulated in the *Republic* (c. 380 BCE). This corrective finds a practical attunement in *The Laws* (c. 348 BCE) and in the defense of a *politeia* (polity or form of government embodying the spirit of the laws) that is constitutional, moderate, and mixed, containing elements of monarchy, aristocracy or oligarchy, and democracy. Aristotle likewise in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* emphasizes the primacy of laws rooted in a proper moral habituation on the part of human beings striving to become good citizens beholden to the common good. The centrality of law and constitutionalism is also emphasized by Polybius' (c. 200-146 BCE) history of Rome, which is mindful of the Platonic and Aristotelian heritage. These touchstones find an unrivaled synthesis in Cicero's defense of the commonwealth exemplified in the ideal of the Roman republic with Sallust (86 BCE-c. CE 35), Livy (59 BCE-CE 17), Seneca (c. 4 BCE-CE 65), and Plutarch (c. CE 46-120) all making significant contributions to the articulation and defense of the common-wealth.

### Medieval and Early Modern Developments

The social and political upheaval of the Middle Ages largely obscures the secular and theoretical development and practical implementation of these ideas for a time, though arguably due consideration must be given to Augustine's (CE 354-430) and Aquinas' (CE 1225-1274) reflections on the (Christian) commonwealth. Indeed, modern political thought arises out of the medieval milieu. As Quentin Skinner (b. 1940) highlights in his foundational analysis of this transitional period, it is with the Italian Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, especially the secular and

theological implications of Calvinism, which revivify and extend classical republican conceptions of the *libertas populi* (free people) and *res publica*. Whether in Marsilius of Padua's (c. 1280-c. 1294) republican inspired *Defensor pacis* (1324) or John Calvin's (1509-1564) *Institutes of the Christian Church* (first edition, 1536), classical conceptions of political order rooted in law, legitimized by the will of the people and directed toward the common and transcendent good are of central concern. Similarly, as we transition to the sixteenth century, we find Thomas More's (1478-1535) *Utopia* (1516) consciously appealing to the idealism of Plato's *Republic* and Jean Bodin's (1530-1596) *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576) no less consciously seeking to improve upon Aristotle's and Cicero's more concrete formulations of republican order.

### The Anglo-American Nexus

It is precisely this medieval milieu that undergirds John Pocock's (b. 1924) ground breaking 1977 study, *The Machiavellian Moment*, in which he links Hans Baron's (1900-1988) study of Florentine civic humanism to republican developments in seventeenth and eighteenth century England and, by extension, colonial America. For Pocock, Niccolò Machiavelli's (1469-1527) innovative reformulations of Greco-Roman republican thought capture the spirit of the age. Furthermore, Pocock's thesis fortified existing academic sensibilities that James Harrington (1611-1677) was England's premier classical republican, understood primarily in terms of Platonic, Aristotelian, Ciceronian, Livyian, and Machiavellian categories meshed with Polybian inspired formulations of constitutionalism. Since its publication, scholars have contested Pocock's thesis, notably arguing that Harrington should be seen less as the principle exemplar of republicanism and instead as a unique expositor of a larger republican tradition. The debate has spurred a renewal of historically contextualized research on the oft neglected commonwealth thought in the Calvinist and Platonic infused poetical and political works of John Milton (1608-1674), the journalistic writings of Marchamont Nedham (1620-1678), and the court maxims and political discourses of Algernon

Sidney (1623-1683) as well as the economic, political, social, and religious thought of a host of other republican thinkers. As Jonathan Scott summarizes the period in his monumental synthesis, “It was the fact of a revolution within which liberty and virtue had powerful religious as well as political content which required these writers to connect Graeco-Roman commitment to civic action to a Platonic epistemology and metaphysics” (Scott 2004: 7). Although it was Oliver Cromwell’s (1599-1658) Commonwealth (The Protectorate) that infamously personified the political realization of commonwealth, the concept continued to exceed this institutional limitation and remained a catch all for any and all political forms that were opposed to hereditary or absolute monarchy or the arbitrary government of the one or few.

In sum, English republicanism and commonwealth thought entails the peculiar interplay of Christian humanist moral philosophy—often socially radical and frequently anti-monarchical—with Enlightenment conceptions of natural rights and a scientific vocabulary arising out of the new science of politics. It seeks to address a dynamic and complicated political, military, economic, and cultural landscape in which the primary concern is to mount ethical and socio-political resistance against monarchism through the articulation of various legal and constitutional theories rooted in the commonwealth tradition. The complex interplay is captured in Caroline Robbins’ (1903-1999) classical study, *The Eighteenth-Century Common-Wealthman* (1959). In turn, as Bernard Bailyn’s (b. 1922) study, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) discloses, these ideas flow across the Atlantic and undergird the American Revolution. American republican principles, embodied in John Adams (1735-1826), James Madison (1751-1836), and virtually all of the founding fathers, are then an admixture of classical and modern republican theorists: Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and Livy, Harrington and John Locke (1632-1704), Samuel von Puffendorf (1632-1694) and Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Edward Coke (1552-1634) and William Blackstone (1723-1780), Plutarch and Francis

Bacon (1561-1626), and a host of other thinkers, who understood that any form of government concerned with “we the people” must entail by necessity a robust sense of common-wealth.

#### The Idea of the Commonwealth in the Twenty-First Century

Despite the rise, one could say dominance, of liberalism, capitalism, and democracy beginning in the nineteenth century, the concept of commonwealth has not been eclipsed and continues to allure mankind, often seen as a corrective to self-oriented individualism beholden to crass materialism sustained by an enslaving egalitarianism. A diverse array of neo-republican, conservative, and communitarian thinkers such as Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), Russell Kirk (1918-1984), Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929), Wendell Berry (b. 1934), Philip Pettit (b. 1945), and Michael Sandel (b. 1953) continue to work toward a politics concerned with the common-wealth of mankind. Furthermore, apart from socio-political entities referring to themselves as commonwealths, whether the former Soviet Republic constellation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the British Commonwealth of Nations, or individual states—let alone atavistic, religiously rooted visions of a Christian or Islamic commonwealth held by certain sects—the prospects and problems of globalization have inspired a rethinking of the concept. The economist Jeffrey Sachs (b. 1954), for instance, uses the concept of commonwealth as a means to address global challenges common to all mankind. In this he too is drawing on a long tradition that continues to evoke a sense of the common weal.

SEE ALSO: British Political Thought; Civic Virtue; Common Good; Democracy; Constitutionalism; Law; Liberalism; Republican Political Thought

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